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SUMMARY OF KINDS OF RESPONSES

Here is an overview of eleven different and valuable ways of responding to writing—and a few thoughts about when each kind is valuable. We will explain them more fully later and illustrate their use on sample essays. After you have tried them out, you can glance back over this list when you want to decide which kind of feedback to request.



1. SHARING: NO RESPONSE

Read your piece aloud to listeners and ask: "Would you please just listen and enjoy?" You can also give them your text to read silently, though you don't usually learn as much this way. Simple sharing is also a way to listen better to your *own responses* to your own piece, without having to think about how others respond. You learn an enormous amount from hearing yourself read your own words—or from reading them over when you know that someone else is also reading them.

No response is valuable in many situations: when you don't have much time, at very early stages when you just want to try something out or feel very tentative, or when you are completely finished and don't plan to make any changes at all—as a form of simple communication or celebration. Sharing gives you a nonpressure setting for getting comfortable reading your words out loud and listening to the writing of others.



2. POINTING AND CENTER OF GRAVITY

Pointing: "Which words or phrases or passages somehow strike you? stick in mind? *get through?*" Center of gravity: "Which sections somehow seem important or resonant or generative?" You are not asking necessarily for the *main points* but rather for sections or passages that seem to resonate or linger in mind or be sources of energy. Sometimes a seemingly minor detail or example—even an aside or a digression—can be a center of gravity.

These quick, easy, interesting forms of response are good for timid or inexperienced responders—or for early drafts. They help you establish a sense of contact with readers. Center of gravity response is particularly interesting for showing you rich and interesting parts of your piece that you might have ne-

glected—but which might be worth exploring and developing. Center of gravity can help you see your piece in a different light and suggest ways to make major revisions.

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3. SUMMARY AND SAYBACK

Summary: “Please summarize what you have heard. Tell me what you hear as the main thing and the almost-main things.” (Variations: “Give me a phrase as title and a one-word title—first using my words and then using your words.”) Sayback: “Please say back to me in your own words what you hear me getting at in my piece, but say it in a somewhat questioning or tentative way—as an invitation for *me to reply* with my own restatement of what you’ve said.”

These are both useful at any stage in the writing process in order to see whether readers “got” the points you are trying to “give.” But sayback is particularly useful at early stages when you are still groping and haven’t yet been able to find what you really want to say. You can read a collection of exploratory passages for sayback response. When readers say back to you what they hear—and invite you to reply—it often leads you to find exactly the words or thoughts or emphasis you were looking for.



4. WHAT IS ALMOST SAID? WHAT DO YOU WANT TO HEAR MORE ABOUT?

Just ask readers those very questions.

This kind of response is particularly useful when you need to *develop* or *enrich* your piece: when you sense there is more here but you haven’t been able to get your finger on it yet. This kind of question gives you concrete substantive help because it leads your readers to give you some of *their ideas* to add to yours. Remember this too: what you imply but don’t say in your writing is often very loud to readers but unheard by you—and has an enormous effect on how they respond.

Extreme variation: “Make a guess about what was on my mind that I *didn’t* write about.”



5. REPLY

Simply ask, “What are *your* thoughts about my topic? Now that you’ve heard what I’ve had to say, what do *you* have to say?”

This kind of response is useful at any point, but it is particularly useful at early stages when you haven’t worked out your thinking yet. Indeed, you can ask for this kind of response even before you’ve written a draft; perhaps you jotted down some notes. You can just say, “I’m thinking about saying X, Y, and Z. How would you reply? What are your thoughts about this topic?” This

is actually the most natural and common response to any human discourse. You are inviting a small discussion of the topic.



6. VOICE

(a) "How much voice do you hear in my writing? Is my language alive and human? Or is it dead, bureaucratic, unsayable?" (b) "*What kind* of voice(s) do you hear in my writing?" Timid? Confident? Sarcastic? Pleading?" Or "What kind of person does my writing sound like? What side(s) of me comes through in my writing? Most of all, "Do you trust the voice or person you hear in my writing?"

This kind of feedback can be useful at any stage. When people describe the voice they hear in writing, they often get right to the heart of subtle but important matters of language and approach. They don't have to be able to talk in technical terms ("You seem to use lots of passive verbs and nominalized phrases"); they can say, "You sound kind of bureaucratic and pompous and I wonder if *you* actually believe what you are saying."



7. MOVIES OF THE READER'S MIND

Ask readers to tell you honestly and in detail what is going on in their minds *as* they read your words. There are three powerful ways to help readers give you this kind of response. (a) Interrupt their reading a few times and find out what's happening at that moment. (b) Get them to tell you their reactions in the form of a *story* that takes place *in time*. (c) If they make "it-statements" ("It was confusing"), make them translate these into "I-statements" ("I felt confused starting here about . . .").

Movies of the reader's mind make the most sense when you have a fairly developed draft and you want to know how it works on readers—rather than when you're still trying to develop your ideas. Movies are the richest and most valuable form of response, but they require that you feel some confidence in yourself and support from your reader, because when readers tell you honestly what is happening while they are reading your piece, they may tell you they don't like it or even get mad at it.



8. METAPHORICAL DESCRIPTIONS

Ask readers to describe your writing in terms of clothing (e.g., jeans, tuxedo, lycra running suit), weather (e.g., foggy, stormy, sunny, humid), animals, colors, shapes.

This kind of response is helpful at any point. It gives you a new view, a new lens; it's particularly helpful when you feel stale on a piece, perhaps because you have worked so long on it. Sometimes young or inexperienced readers are good at giving you this kind of response when they are unskilled at other kinds.



9. BELIEVING AND DOUBTING

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Believing: "Try to believe everything I have written, even if you disagree or find it crazy. At least *pretend* to believe it. Be my friend and ally and give me more evidence, arguments, and ideas to help me make my case better."

Doubting: "Try to doubt everything I have written, even if you love it. Take on the role of enemy and find all the arguments that can be made against me. Pretend to be someone who hates my writing. What would he or she notice?"

These forms of feedback obviously lend themselves to persuasive essays or arguments, though the believing game can help you flesh out and enrich the world of a story or poem. Believing is good when you are struggling and want help. It's a way to get readers to give you new ideas and arguments and in fact improve your piece in all sorts of ways. Doubting is good after you've gotten a piece as strong as you can get it and you want to send it out or hand it in—but first find out how hostile readers will fight you.



10. SKELETON FEEDBACK AND DESCRIPTIVE OUTLINE

Skeleton feedback: "Please lay out the reasoning you see in my paper: my main point, my subpoints, my supporting evidence, and my assumptions about my topic and about my audience." Descriptive outline: "Please write *says* and *does* sentences for my whole paper and then for each paragraph or section." A *says* sentence summarizes the meaning or message, and a *does* sentence describes the function.

These are the most useful for essays. They are feasible only if the reader has the text in hand and can take a good deal of time and care—and perhaps write out responses. Because they give you the most distance and perspective on what you have written, they are uniquely useful for giving feedback to *yourself*. Both kinds of feedback help you on late drafts when you want to test out your reasoning and organization. But skeleton feedback is also useful on early drafts when you are still trying to figure out what to say or emphasize and how to organize your thoughts.



11. CRITERION-BASED FEEDBACK

Ask readers to give you their thoughts about specific criteria that you are wondering about or struggling with: "Does this sound too technical?" "Is this section too long?" "Do my jokes work for you?" "Do you feel I've addressed the objections of people who disagree?" And of course, "Please find mistakes in spelling and grammar and typing." You can also ask readers to address what *they* think are the important criteria for your piece. You can ask too about traditional criteria for essays: focus on the assignment or task, content (ideas, reasoning, support, originality), organization, clarity of language, and voice.